
MEXICO

Learner Self Assessment in Reading Comprehension: The Case for Student-Constructed Tests

Patrick Smith

Universidad de las Américas-Puebla

I understood the reading, but the questions were confusing. —Fernando

My English is better than this. I don't know why I got such a bad grade on the reading.

—Deyanira

Like Fernando and Deyanira, many students of English as a Foreign Language feel that their reading comprehension is better than they are able to demonstrate on comprehension tests. It is not unusual for students to obtain enough oral fluency and grammatical accuracy to test into advanced classes. But they may continue to perform badly on reading tests if they do not receive specific training in academic reading skills.

This article describes a technique for helping students improve reading comprehension and reading-test performance. The examples provided here reflect the type of reading test currently in use in the Language Department at the Universidad de las Américas-Puebla. To make the ideas presented in this article useful in other contexts, teachers are invited to modify the procedures to fit their particular situation.

The theory behind student-constructed tests

We know from experience that student performance on reading sections of standardized tests like the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) can improve with focused instruction. But why is such instruction helpful? As Casanave (1988) points out, improvement in academic reading performance may take place in three schemata areas: content, form, and strategy schema. Because content schema is largely a function of the intersection between test topic and students' background knowledge, it is beyond the students' ability to control and thus beyond the scope of this article. We can, however, work to improve our students' command of form and strategies. Casanave (1988) notes that articulation (sharing) of strategies

improves reading comprehension. Similarly, in an experiment of the effects of teaching text structure to ESL students, Carrell (1985) found that reading comprehension was improved where learners received prior instruction on text forms and patterns.

Since the literature shows that form and strategies training can be used to improve reading comprehension in L₂ why not concentrate on these areas in our teaching? We can do this by asking students to create reading tests themselves. The benefits of this process are explained more fully below, but they can be summarized at this point by considering the relationship of the reader with a text. The dynamic that the reader constructs between text and test is qualitatively different from that which s/he forms with the text alone. As language teachers, we use tests to measure our students' comprehension of text, which alters the equation between reader and text. Since reading tests are integral to assessing student progress and measuring proficiency for further academic study (TOEFL and Michigan tests), teachers have a responsibility to help students develop schema for the form and strategies of reading tests.

This can be done by having students work in groups to create a test. Form schema is created as students grapple with the test format to construct a relationship of text to test. Creating and later taking the test in groups gives students the opportunity to discuss useful strategies. This point is especially important at the university level given what is known about the transfer of reading-comprehension strategies from L₁ to L₂ (Nevo 1989). This process, in which students create a reading test, is an attempt to organize the foreign language classroom to take advantage of what the research shows about second-language reading comprehension.

An overview of the process

Working in small groups, students will create a reading-comprehension test modeled on tests regularly used in the program. Grades are given to each group based on their contribution, with all group members receiving the same score. Group contributions are edited and compiled to form one complete test to be taken by the class. The final step in the process is a follow-up session to share test-taking strategies.

Steps in the process

1. Select a text similar to those used by the program for reading-comprehension exams.

2. Form groups (3–4 students) to work together throughout the process.

3. Introduce the process. Explain the purpose, the roles of the students, the group, and the teacher, and what is to be done with the product created. (See Appendix 1, "Who Does What in the Process?")

4. Demonstrate/review the types of questions featured on exams. (It is helpful to have retired versions of exams available as examples for groups to consult.) Establish how many questions each group is responsible for and a tentative timetable for completion of this segment of the process.

5.(a) Discuss possible models for group work—each person works alone and the group meets afterwards to edit and approve individual contributions; or either pairs or the whole group works together to create questions.

(b) Groups decide which language they will speak as they create the test.

Encourage each group to reach a decision on points (a) and (b) before they begin work.

6. Ensure that all groups understand the objectives and procedures of the process.

7. Assign reading.

8. Student groups work to create test questions based on the text. Teacher circulates to help and observe.

9. Group members edit and sign their contribution before handing it in to the teacher.

10. Evaluate group contributions based on product and observation.

11. Compile "best" questions into one document.

12. Students take the test they have just constructed.

13. Students respond to questionnaire (Appendix 2).

APPENDIX 1

Developing Student Skills on Academic Reading Tests

Who Does What in the Process?

Students work in teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to understand the reading. - to develop test questions. - to determine group and individual responsibilities. - to develop answers for these questions. - to take the test as practice.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - selects the reading on which the test is based (can also be done by students). - works with student teams to understand the reading. - demonstrates possible formats for questions and distractors. - helps teams in the design of the test. - edits questions and distractors. - compiles work of various groups into one test document. - provides copies for the class. - leads the feedback/strategy session following the process.
The teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discuss possible answers to questions. - correct the practice exam. - share test-taking strategies for "next time." - decide whether to continue the process.
The whole class works together to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can be used as practice material in other courses. - can be included in student or team portfolios. - can serve as a reference by students beginning the process. - can assist teachers in determining future readings.
The exam	

14. Feedback/strategy session. Class discusses test-taking strategies, ideas for "next time." The class decides whether to continue the process, and the changes to be made.

Benefits of student-constructed reading tests

Work is currently being done to find whether there is a correlation between participation in the process and subsequent reading-test scores. Although definitive claims will depend on statistical analysis, four areas of improvement in student performance can be predicted: (a) improvement in reading comprehension; (b) focus on written production and meaning; (c) assumption of personal responsibility for learning; and (d) opportunity for observation.

Improvement in reading comprehension. Based on the questionnaire, 76% of the students felt that the process of writing an exam would help them perform

better on subsequent reading exams of the same type. In addition, students felt that the process of writing the exam helped them to understand the text on which it was based. In particular, the process seems to be useful in helping students begin reading with a global focus before concentrating on details within the text. Finally, although it is not the focus of this article to isolate the transfer of specific reading strategies from the context of a student-constructed exam to subsequent readings of different texts, such a transfer seems to take place as a result of the process.

Focus on written production and meaning. Observation and student response to the questionnaire indicate that in the process of writing a reading exam, participants spend considerable effort on their written production of English (and on spoken production in those groups which elect to use English as the medium of communication). With regard to written production, students become aware that the accuracy of their writing is crucial to communicating fine shades of meaning. There is still a great deal of emphasis on finding the perfect word using dictionaries, but within groups students learn to check each other's work. In particular, I have found that student knowledge of the relationship between morphology and semantics/syntax becomes apparent as it seldom does elsewhere in production. Students are able to help each other determine whether "endeavor" is a noun or a verb in a given context, which may have as much to do with the authenticity of the task as it does with the nature of group work. In short, students in the process devote considerable energy to the monitoring of language, their own and that of other group members, in a manner that is remarkably natural given the classroom setting.

Assumption of personal responsibility for learning. Writing reading tests to-

Patrick Smith coordinates a technical English program and is assistant professor in the MA Program in Second Language Teaching at the Universidad de las Américas-Puebla, in Mexico. He has also taught in other programs in Kenya and the U.S.

APPENDIX 2—Questionnaire

Instructions: After you finish taking the reading test, please take a few minutes to answer these questions. Your answers will help improve this activity for students in the future.

WRITING THE TEST

1. Have you ever written or helped to write a test before? An English test?
2. How did the members of your group work when you wrote the test? Did everyone work together on the questions or did each group member write separately and then share what they had done? Describe the way(s) your group worked.
3. What did your group talk about most when you were writing the test?
4. What language did your group decide to speak while you wrote the test? Did the group use that language most of the time? If not, please explain why.

TAKING THE TEST

5. Have you ever taken a group test before?
6. Did you like taking the test in a group or would you have preferred to take the test individually?
7. What did you like about taking the test in a group?
8. What did you dislike about taking the test in a group?
9. Did you recognize any questions written by your group?
10. What did you think when you saw your question(s) on the test?
11. Did you convince anyone in your group to agree with an answer you thought was correct?
12. Did anyone in your group convince you to change one of your answers?

AFTER THE TEST/THINKING ABOUT THE PROCESS

13. What is more important to you—understanding the content (ideas, vocabulary) of the reading, or understanding the form (what the questions and answers look like)?
14. What type of question is usually the most difficult for you to answer during reading tests (general comprehension, main idea, paraphrasing, words in context)?
15. Did this process help you do better on this type of question?
16. If you answered "yes" to question 15, please explain how writing the reading test helped you. Are there strategies you learned on this test that you will use in the future?
17. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: "Writing the test helped me do well on this particular test, but I doubt it will help me improve on future reading tests."?
18. Is this a useful process to continue doing in class or do you think once is enough?
19. Please write any other comments or ideas you have about writing or taking the test.

gether promotes learner responsibility. As they write tests, students have access to four resources: their own experience/knowledge; that of the members of their group; a dictionary; and the teacher. To encourage students to use all the resources at their disposal, I consult with students only after the first three options have been exhausted. Asking "What do you think?" and "Why do you think so?" also gives students an opportunity to use logic and to formulate their hypotheses orally. In addition to assuming responsibility for one's own learning, this process helps build responsibility towards a group. Working with the same people over time allows learners to recognize their own strengths and needs and those of the other group members.

Opportunity for observation. As one of the most important benefits of student-written tests, the opportunity for observation has little to do with how much a student's reading comprehension improves. In the beginning of the process, it seems natural to me to focus on group dynamics, but as students get the hang

of working together, there is freedom to observe a range of behaviors. I have focused on peer correction, individual students, and their use of the dictionary, among other topics. While the increased opportunity for observation benefits students indirectly, it can be an important tool in improving one's own teaching.

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